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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3304  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3168  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3828  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN RESPONDS TO LETTER FROM  
REPRESENTATIVE JOSEPH PITTS

REF: HEWITT - ECKSTROM E-MAIL 8/21/09

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Nor for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Deputy Foreign Minister Hajiyevev called in DCM on August 26 to discuss a letter Representative Joseph Pitts had sent to President Berdimuhamedov on the topic of religious freedom in Turkmenistan. Hajiyevev said that while they respect the opinion of Representative Pitts, they do not agree with the letter. Hajiyevev said that one religious group had been registered and two others had been reregistered in September 2008. He also said that Turkmenistan is considering adopting those recommendations by the UN Special Rapporteur on Religion "that do not contradict Turkmen law" and will not implement alternative service for just one group. DCM took the opportunity to raise the issue of the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) students and stressed that while we want them to be able to study in Kyrgyzstan, we are prepared to help them attend American University of Bulgaria instead. We hope that the students would be able to travel to Bulgaria. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) On August 26, Deputy Foreign Minister Wepa Hajiyevev called in the DCM to discuss a letter received from Congressman Joseph Pitts, addressed to President Berdimuhamedov, and dealing with religious freedom in Turkmenistan. Hajiyevev said his country values its good relations with the United States and our active cooperation. He said there were productive contacts between the MFA and the Embassy, as well as with the State Department. He regretted that ties between the parliaments of the two countries were not as developed and hoped that would be rectified.

14. (SBU) Turning to the letter, Hajiyevev said that the Turkmen side had carefully studied it. While Turkmen officials have respect for Representative Pitts' opinion, they do not agree with the content of the letter. He said everyone has a right to express their opinion, but views should be based on objective information. Furthermore, diplomacy should not be conducted through letters. They are not official (unlike diplomatic notes) and could cause misunderstandings. He cautioned against resorting to "stereotypes" (such as there

is no religious freedom in Turkmenistan).

¶5. (SBU) He noted that more than 100 religious groups are currently registered in Turkmenistan, including 11 non-traditional (non-Islamic and non-Orthodox Christian) groups. In September 2008, one religious group was registered and two were re-registered. Hajiyeve said he sits on a panel that reviews registrations, and they are currently reviewing the applications of two churches, whose cases the Embassy had raised, the Light of Life and Path of Faith churches. If a group has a minimum of five members, it can be registered as a religious group. Nevertheless, organizations need to present documentation, and Turkmen officials need to take decisions that preserve security.

¶6. (SBU) Regarding the recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur for Religious Freedom, who visited Turkmenistan last fall, Hajiyeve said they are considering those recommendations that do not contradict Turkmen law. They will not be implementing those that contradict Turkmen law. He also said that the government could not provide alternative service to members of just one group.

¶7. (SBU) DCM pushed back and said that the United States has three, independent branches of government, and Congress has an important and powerful role. While each congressman has his or her opinion, it is the policy of the U.S. Government to support religious freedom. Furthermore, we hope that the Turkmenistan Government will register additional religious groups.

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AUCA

¶8. (SBU) DCM then took the opportunity to raise the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) students. She noted that the U.S. strongly supports allowing the students to travel to Kyrgyzstan for their studies. However, if they are unable to study there, we would like them to study in Bulgaria at the American University of Bulgaria (AUBG). We are aware that Migration Services has a list of AUCA students, and we do not want them to be prevented from flying to Bulgaria because of that list. Hajiyeve said they were working on trying to resolve the issue of the students by September 1, but had no substantive comment about study at AUBG.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Hajiyeve showed no flexibility regarding the issues raised by Representative Pitts, which illustrates the importance of also covering religious freedom and human rights, more broadly, in the bilateral forum. It will provide an opportunity for both sides to speak frankly and promote reform.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: In recent days, from various sources, we had heard that some resolution may be in the works for the students who wanted to study in Kyrgyzstan, and this would be revealed around September 1. The likely resolution (rather than permitting students to go to Kyrgyzstan) will be to give them some preference for study in Russia. We have heard Russia study mentioned from two different Ministry of Education officials, and every Turkmen official with whom we have spoken insists that study in Kyrgyzstan is not possible. END COMMENT.

MILES